

Dorcas Utter Sensory Garden a feel-good place

By Mary James
HOMESCAPE EDITOR
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The late Dorcas Utter of El Cajon was “the ultimate docent,” say her fellow volunteers at the Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College. Even though macular degeneration had robbed her of her vision, for years Utter worked weekly at the garden with help from her seeing-eye dog, Sharla.

“She said she was busier than ever after she stopped working as a budget analyst at Scripps Institution of Oceanography,” said Rosalie Dosik of El Cajon, who took her docent training from Utter. “When we had the memorial service for her after she passed away in November 2007, people came from other places where she volunteered – the Braille Institute, Natural History Museum, Quail Botanical Gardens, the Audubon Society. She was amazing.”

In honor of Utter's years of service, Water Conservation Garden docents have upgraded the sensory garden there and named it the Dorcas Utter Sensory Garden. The modest garden – rich in scents, textures and sounds that appeal to all ages and abilities – will be dedicated Sept. 12 at 10 a.m. (To attend, RSVP to info@thegarden.org.)

The sensory garden, Dosik said, was Utter's “favorite place in the garden. She loved the aromas and textures and said they spoke to her. So we thought it was an appropriate spot to dedicate her.

“But when we looked at it with fresh eyes, we realized that it didn't do what it could do for people like Dorcas.”

With help from Jon Powell and Jeri Deneen of Deneen Powell Atelier, original designers of the Water Conservation Garden, and the dedicated work of the garden's docents, the refurbished garden features new wheelchair-accessible paths, seating and raised beds that put plants in easy reach of curious fingers and sensitive noses.

Plants were chosen to tickle both. There are candy-scented chocolate cosmos (*Cosmos atrosanguineus*), spicy curry plants (*Helichrysum italicum*), pungent Mexican marigold (*Tagetes lucida*), fuzzy blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*), furry lion's tails (*Leonotis leonurus*) and many more.

“The beds are chock-full. They have a cottage garden feel,” said Dosik, who served as project coordinator. “Plus all the plants are drought-tolerant.”

The docents also created textured succulent plantings for boxes and hanging baskets placed to encourage touching.

Two arbors mark the entrances to the garden, located next to the vegetable garden. One leads to a gate that triggers the sound of rain from a rain stick made from a gourd. Wind chimes also add their music.

On the other arbor is a plaque in memory of Utter engraved with a quote from John Burroughs: “I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order.”

The Water Conservation Garden is at 12122 Cuyamaca College Drive West, El Cajon. Hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. Closed Labor Day. More info is at www.thegarden.org



NELVIN C. CEPEDA / Union-Tribune

The Dorcas Utter Sensory Garden at The Water Conservation Garden honors a dedicated volunteer and docent who lost her vision late in life.